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DICE Case Files #1: Weapon Mastery VIRTUA



vr

deadly-game

police-procedural

178 3 6

Chapter 1 by Harlander

Misaki Oshiro was slumped on a reclining chair in a darkened office in Minato. A telepresence rig was clamped about her head, the cheap plastic digging into her cheeks and adding to the list of complaints about her new job.

Working for the ITU's cybercrime directorate, an agency barely a year old, had sounded like an exciting opportunity at the recruiting fair, but the truth had been much less glamorous. Like many of the UN's attempts to actually accomplish something tangible, DICE was a poorly-funded endeavour, staffed with cast-offs from national police forces and distrusted by more local agencies, and to add insult to injury, named in French (Direction Internationale du Crime Électronique, which at least gave it a cool acronym)

The cheapness of the VR headset she wore, not to mention her poky branch office nestled up against the Kazakhstani embassy, was just another sign of the small amounts of money the agency had to throw around.

She sighed, sipped iced coffee through a straw, and triggered the connection to headquarters.

The DICE logo, a wireframe globe framed by gold olive leaves, span in the void before her before she found herself sitting in

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Venäläinen. He spoke, with a slight delay as the translation algorithms shuffled his words to Japanese from his native Finnish.

"Something big's come in, so I'll get right down to it," he began. He looked strangely animated, much more than DICE's usual workload of botnets and AI 419 scams would suggest.

"We've got rumours of a whole new type of crime ready to break out in a virtual world," he began. Law enforcement worldwide already viewed MMOs with suspicion, perfect places for malcontents to talk in code hidden among the 'normal' orc-slaying masses. "I'm talking about murder."

Misaki leaned forward in her virtual chair. This was more interesting than she'd expected.

"You might have heard about the new MMO that's launching soon in Japan, Weapon Mastery VRTUA." The public opening was in a couple of weeks time. "We've had informants in the closed beta, and rumours are circulating. Something about how, if you die in the game, you'll die for real." There were chuckles - that was a line straight out of bad sci-fi. "This is serious. Our analysis group has looked into it and there's a real risk. Something about lethal somatic feedback or some such."

"Holy hell," a voice muttered. "We've got to shut that thing down."

"Absolutely," Tuomo said with a nod. "But we can't just crash their servers remotely. That could trigger whatever's set to kill the players. Besides, its servers' locations are hidden. We've had no luck tracking down a single one."

He paused for a moment.

"We need to track down Takashi Ito, the game's lead developer. Trouble is, he's completely dropped off the map - so to speak. We're sure, though, that he'll be found within this world he's created. We'll need to get an agent on the inside to track him down and get him to reverse whatever lethal measure he's taken"

Before she realised it, Misaki was she yelled, making her colleagues jump in surprise.

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Chapter 2 by Harlander



The package arrived the next day. It was accompanied with a very long document from DICE Technical Services, which went into deep and, frankly, slightly incomprehensible detail about the dangers associated with the piece of technology held within. There was a legal form which, when signed, would attest that Misaki had taken up this task of her own free will. Inside, nestled in grey foam, was the Weapon Mastery VIRTUA headset.

It looked like some kind of steel-gray squid, its flexible plastic tendrils linked to a chromed visor. Ports for cables were sunk into the end of one tendril. Also in the package was a dull grey box, studded with LEDs and stamped with the ITU's logo. "Plug the headset into the box," their tech guy, Mitch, had said, "and plug the box into any 'net jack. We'll be able to monitor your vitals, maybe mess with the signal and help you out."

"Will you be able to stop the lethal signal?" Misaki had asked.

"Maybe. If nothing else, we'll be able to detect it, maybe work on a countermeasure to save the rest of the players."

"Real comforting."

She'd spent a few days going through the various WMV forums. The game was in public beta, so people were already talking about their favourite strategies. The DICE informants had given Misaki detailed reports as well.

She'd done all the preparation she could. The day, and the hour of the public launch rolled around. The headset was jacked into the breakout box, which was connected into her home 'net port.

She settled the headset on her head. It was weirdly squishy. The visor filled her vision, dark but for the status indicator in the corner. A timer counted down. One minute.

She laid back on her reclining couch, the material settling about her body. Thirty seconds.

Ten... five...

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The tendrils of the headset suddenly climbed back around her head and her vision filled with light...

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Her eyes were closed.

The first thing she felt was the sunlight on her face and the breeze on her skin. The sensations were uncanny. Tactile feedback wasn't unheard of in full-immersion VR, but this was a whole new level. She could feel the weight of her limbs, and the brush of coarse fibre against her skin.

She opened her eyes and looked down at herself. The recreation of her body was flawless, down to the short scar on her left ring finger. She was dressed in a plain robe of some rough fabric. Her feet were bare, and she could feel the sun-warmed stone tiles beneath them.

She stood in the centre of a large stone sundial, set in a sunlit grassy plain that stretched to the horizon. She was alone.

"Greetings," a voice said, the sound seeming to come from the cloudless sky above. "Welcome to Weapon Mastery VIRTUA. It is time to choose your weapon."

With a soft grinding sound, stone pillars rose from each of the points of the sundial. Each bore a different weapon, representing the twelve starting classes in the game.

Misaki looked around, examining each weapon from afar. Suddenly, a blinking square appeared in the corner of her vision. After a moment, she realised it was a blinking cursor.

The cursor began to move, spelling out words as if being typed by someone else.

HEY MISAKI, the first line read.

MITCH HERE

WEVE LOCKED ONTO YOUR SIGNAL

STAY COOL

WELL FIGURE OUT A WAY FOR YOU TO TALK BACK

ALSO WELL FIGURE OUT PUNCTUATION

Misaki blinked a few times, and the words vanished.

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She moved across to one of the pillars. A pair of circular lock plates lay on the top, the starter weapons of the Gladiator class. She picked up the lock plates, turning them around on her fingers.

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"Excellent choice," the voice said. "Step through the doorway now, and enter the game."

The stones of the sundial cracked and rose up into the air, shaping themselves into an arch. Misaki shoved the guns into a pair of holsters that'd appeared at her waist, and stepped through.

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